Pradeepan Pampirikunnu

Born in 1969 in Pampirikunnu village of Kozhikode district, Pradeepan attended local government schools before going to the University of Calicut. He stood first in the university in MA and went on to secure a PhD from the same university. His dissertation, written in Malayalam, is a dalit reading of Kerala culture with special reference to literary works, and proposes a critique of mainstream Kerala culture and the apparently secular-nationalist idea of '*kelaralatvam*' or 'keralaness'.

He explains: Chandu Menon's *Indulekha* (1889), the celebrated first Malayalam novel, stages a conflict between a feudal, nair project of modernity and western modernity. We find no dalit characters in the novel. By contrast, Potheri Kunjambu's *Saraswativijayam* (1892), which treats conversion as a means to overcome caste, is far less discussed. It is actually the first non-brahmin, non-nair novel in Malayalam. This obscurity of secularism is one reason why dalit creative writing emerged so late in Kerala. 'Nairization', not secularization, is the project of the dominant culture in Kerala. Caste is a hidden identity for dalits in Kerala. Few people will openly declare their caste.

Commenting on the shift in dalit thinking in the 1990s, Pradeepan says: 'This is the period in which, finally, an educated elite begins to emerge from the dalit community.' Also in the 1990s, the realization begins to dawn that 'this is all, at root, caste'. One reason for this is the 'new brahiminical movements' that emerge both at the all-India and Kerala levels, claiming to be inclusive, but actually reasserting caste pride and caste strength. These communitarian movements provide 'upper' castes with new strength to assert caste identities and even to take pride in what is nostalgically reaffirmed as Kerala or Malayali culture in food, aesthetic value, public life and architecture. In Kerala, Pradeepan asserts, 'all culture is caste culture'. All the

same, while there is a lively academic debate on caste, questions of dalit identity and politics have very little foundation in grass-roots politics, he observes.

One of the difficulties faced by dalit politics, he says, is that dalits wish not to consolidate, but to annihilate caste. Unlike the ezhavar and the SNDP or the nair and the NSS, dalits do not engage their identity in order to hold on to it or strengthen it. Thus, while the use of identity did not pose a problem for the former groups, for Ayyankali and the SJPS the issue was how to unite different dalit groups in order to *abolish* caste. So, his engagement with caste identity is very different. The irony is that, despite this, today dalit politics is branded as casteist and undemocratic, while movements that consolidate caste pass as secular.

Pradeepan teaches in the department of Malayalam at the Koilandy regional centre of the Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady, and is widely recognized as a promising young intellectual. He has been writing on dalit issues since 1993, publishing in the mainstream literary journals (*Bhashaposhini, Madhyamam, Mathrubhumi*) and in several edited collections. He is a popular speaker not only in the academic world (a regular participant in conferences and workshops), but also in public life (radio, trade union meetings). His book, *Dalit Patanam: Svathvam Samskaram Sahithyam* (Dalit Studies: Identity, Culture, Literature, 2007), has been published by the Kerala State Institute of Languages in its 'Fifty Years, Fifty Books' series.

NATIONALISM, MODERNITY, KERALANESS: A SUBALTERN CRITIQUE

Translated by Suresh P. Thomas

In the concluding section of *A Cultural History of India*, A.L. Basham makes a statement on Indian democracy.

> We emphasize the word 'individual' here because despite all appearances to the contrary, the thought of India is essentially individualist. The ancient Indian seer, unlike the Chinese sage or the Hebrew prophet, thought not in terms of the salvation of the whole people, an aim which he believed to be impossible in an age of decline, but of the salvation of individual 'men and women'. This fundamental individualism is perhaps the reason why India, unlike most other former colonial countries, has taken so enthusiastically to parliamentary democracy, where ultimate political power is in the hands of enormous number of individuals, each casting his vote alone and in secret. (Basham, 1975: 498)

For centuries, an individualist idea of salvation (*moksha*) has been the basis of Indian life. This means that the *savarna* ('upper'-caste) Indian sense of individualism that lies hidden in the democratic process that evolved over the six decades since Independence, is not accidental or incidental. It is in fact a sense that has been omnipresent in the region's history. Like democracy, caste too is practised secretly and in private as well as in the open. What is more, as far as India is concerned, caste is not a superstructure. It is a self-sufficient structure that includes economic processes too. Landlordism was not the economic base on which caste developed. On the contrary, it was on caste-based production relationships that landlordism was built. In Kerala it functioned with the following structure: pulayar, parayar (agricultural slave labourers)—nair (managers, overseers)—brahmin, namboothiri (landlords). The village structure was a group of different castes working to sustain this order of production.

The new Kerala, structured by anti-caste and anti-landlord ideas, emerged as a result of the renaissance efforts begun in the last decades of the nineteenth century and extended through the communist movement and the land reforms in the mid-twentieth century. It is this Kerala which is now facing a crisis with regard to production. The crisis is regarded to be a result of the freeing of a large percentage of pulayar and parayar from agricultural slave labour. The migration of these subaltern castes into new occupational sectors, it would appear, has resulted in a shortage of labour in the agricultural sector.

Agricultural production relations in Kerala were built on romantic illusions of the pulaya/paraya–landlord relationship. This is typified in Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's novel, *Randidangazhi* (Two Measures [of Rice], 1948). The underlying formation of Indian nationalism, in which exploitation was taken as the natural order of life, is also romantic-religious in nature. Even the national flag is imagined as a harmonious blend of Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist religious signs. The Indian freedom movement also drew on a structure of this kind when it tried to form an anti-colonial religio-nationalist unity by bringing together the Hindus. This is the context in which Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar were identified as the heroes of the Indian renaissance. The fact that people like Jotirao Phule, who analysed caste oppression in a broad modern perspective and struggled uncompromisingly against it, were not recognized as heroes of a *national* renaissance is today regarded as a weakness of the 'secular' historiography of India.[1] In Kerala, the state of affairs is no different. A figure such as Ayyankali is only regarded as 'Emperor of Pulayar' and not as an icon for Kerala as a whole. Even a communist and nationalist like EMS did not recognize the importance of Ayyankali in his writings. Overall, we can identify two nodes in this caste sensibility: 1) A public node that is formed in relation to the nationalism which has consolidated an ideological base throughout India; 2) A complex, regional-cultural life structure, constituted by subtle layering of castes and the rituals and beliefs they embody . . . The prescribed distances to be maintained between castes were part of this regional specificity, while in domains of aesthetics and philosophical thought, Kerala shared the pan-Indian paradigm.

Although the Kerala renaissance of the early twentieth century, starting with Sree Narayana Guru, aimed at the integration of the 'lower' (*avarna*) castes into an elite and savarna nationalism, subtle differences hidden in its formation opened up possibilities for liberation. For one thing, this renaissance introduces a casteless

[1] The analysis of the savarna nature of nationalist emotions in Sumit Sarkar's *Writing Social History* (2005) is noteworthy. The modern nationalist was always a savarna.

spirituality. Any stone can be god.[2] Important also is an anti-caste position that is combined with the assimilation of Western modernity. It displaces the idea of a traditional caste occupation and introduces that of the worker. As a result, SNDP encourages the setting up of factories as well as libraries. In Ayyankali's maiden speech before the Travancore Sree Moolam Praja Sabha, he proposed the concept of 'farm land for those who farm it'.[3] We should today recognize that the modernization process effected by Narayana Guru and Ayyankali was a grounded, regional development that runs parallel to Western modernity.

As a liberating ideal, Western modernity appears as early as 1889 in Chandu Menon's *Indulekha*. However, Western modernity created a sense of the universal citizen which was essentially British-centric. So, although Narayana Guru brought a regional population into the savarna public sphere, the backdrop of national modernity assigned them universal citizenship. Kumaranasan, who was the secretary of the SNDP, writes: 'Lower castes, in all areas, should imitate higher castes and gradually reach the higher stage.' (*Kumaranasante Gadhyalekhanangal*: 119)

However, nobody recognized the distinct turn in the modernization process that was initiated by Narayana Guru and Ayyankali, a process that was based on a materialist production-centric environment and the idea of social justice. This was facilitated by the shift in the agricultural sector that resulted in an expansion of agrarian relations which now absorbed industrial ideals. At the same time, national modernity transmitted the strange notion that to destroy caste, it was enough to be a universal citizen and that there was no need for the specific contexts or the broader environments of caste to change. These initial movements of this regional modernity, based on anti-caste ideology and socio-economic democracy, were soon set aside, and a European rationality based on an idea of universal

[2] Sree Narayana Guru wrote an avarna chapter in priesthood when he installed a Siva idol in Aruvippuram in 1888. It became the cornerstone of the Kerala renaissance.
[3] Ayyankali was nominated by the maharaja as a member of this popular assembly in 1911.

man was endorsed. The result was that no ordinary lives could match those found in the autobiographies of K.P. Kesava Menon or V.K. Krishna Menon. Universality was their poetic vision. There are many instances in Malayalam poetry also where the immediate reality of caste is submerged by this nationalist universalism. The fact that in Vallathol Narayana Menon's poem, 'Mathruvandanam' (Salute the Mother), the line 'Praise the mother[land]' is repeated forty-three times is a symptom of this savarna nationalism.

In 1913 K.P. Kesava Menon went to England to study for his degree. That was the very time when Krishnadi Asan tied boats together to form a raft and launched the Pulaya Mahajana Sabha from that platform.[4] He believed that organizing his people was the way to freedom. He also tried to provide his community with education. This is how he made the rationality of a modernity that stemmed from his own material environment into the inner strength of his community. Ayyankali, Poikayil Yohannan or Krishnadi Asan never acquired the status of Kerala's national leaders. Neither did they attain the status of universal citizens. They remained merely pulaya and paraya leaders. Briefly stated, the argument here is that the modern Keralite was shaped by a combination of savarna nationalism and universal humanism.

Another important social process that took place during this renaissance was the coming together of sub-castes into communities. Sudras became nairs and several sub-castes were incorporated into this larger nair community. Similarly, several sub-castes were consolidated into the new ezhava community. In place of the sub-castes, a community arose and for this community an organization emerged that had a strong economic base. Through such organizations the process of modernization was strengthened. Caste organizations started their own institutions in all sectors. These included schools, temples, marriage halls, colleges, industrial endeavours, banks and so on. In course of time, these communities became crucial bidding forces in the electoral process.

[4] He was forced to hold this meeting on water since he was denied the permission to do so on land.

The Muslim community and the Christian community also arrived at power positions from which they could influence governments. Drawing on the strength of religion and religious institutions, they became ruling groups. However, the SJPS formed by Ayyankali, which embodied an *anti-caste* ideology, grew increasingly fragile and ended up as dysfunctional in our democracy. Caste, not anti-casteism, was the basis for this democracy. In elections, a nair contested against nair, Christian against Christian, and pulaya against pulaya. However, when dalits claimed community capital based on their community identity, the very political parties that were tactically using caste in their politics blamed the dalits for undermining class and promoting caste politics.

The oppressed, on the other hand, never acquired power for themselves. For these fifty or more years after the Kerala state was formed, they have been part of various socio-political movements. Parties came into power and moved out of it. All that happened was that, based on reservations, a dalit might get a small ministerial post. Alongside this, the communists themselves raised the issue of reservations for the economically backward among the upper castes, thereby diluting the idea of *social justice* which is the essence of reservation.

Jokes about the reserved sections now needing only eight months to bring a baby to full term, are still afloat. Despite doing no wrong themselves, as a result of the casteism in the public sphere, people from reserved categories who occupy high positions conceal their identity. In fact, the key crisis, which the above-mentioned universal citizenship and modernization process created among dalits, was related to the social (in)correctness of revealing one's own caste. The communist movement, too, openly adopted the stand that revealing one's caste identity is pre-modern and anti-class. Yet, savarna sections have for centuries retained an upper hand in the social structure and enjoyed the privileges of caste hierarchy. In effect, modernization created a pro-savarna silence in dalits. What is more, it was because of this fake modernity that the general public in Kerala did not recognize the casteism involved in annexing Nair or Pillai to one's name.

The silence of the oppressed in the Malayalam novel, which begins with *Indulekha*, is an outcome of this. Even fifty years later, in Thakazhi's much-celebrated novel about the oppressed, *Randidangazhi*, there is no trace to be found of Ayyankali's ideals. In that novel, the pulaya dream is to make Koran, son of the hero, into an asset for the agricultural labourers' union. The pulayar do not dream of sending him to school or making him a graduate. Clearly, Thakazhi did not share the dream of attaining education which the renaissance had put forward for the emancipation of the oppressed. We should also read this as a sign of the absence of realism in Marxist politics. Communists have reduced the question of social power for dalits to one of feudalism or landlordism. At the level of literary discourse Thakazhi did not take up and pursue the dialectic between savarna and avarna initiated in *Saraswativijayam* (Victory of Saraswati) by Potheri Kunjambu in 1892.[5] This historical limitation is also that of Kerala's Marxist vision. Neither did *Randidangazhi* build on the reality of caste represented in other early novels such as *Ghathakavadham* (The Slayer Slain, 1877) or *Parishkaravijayam* (Victory of Reform).[6] It considered caste only as a super-structural effect of landlordism.

Kerala's political and cultural agendas and public sensibility has been under the control of the Congress and the communists. For the Congress the nationalist savarna modern man was the model, while the communists considered only a working-class savarna man as their own. So, there was no public discussion on the lives and living environment of those outside of these modular formations. With respect to this, it is also significant that in the writings of EMS, caste is not a focal issue. This means that the silence with regard to dalits is not personal, but historical. Parallel to this, savarna

[5] *Saraswativijayam* is a novel written by Potheri Kunjambu in 1892, a mere three years after *Indulekha*. That this novel, which narrates the story of a pulaya who gets converted, receives education and becomes a judge who questions savarna laws and philosophical transactions, has not been given serious attention in the twentieth century should also be regarded as part of the history of this silence.

[6] These two early Malayalam novels narrate the story of oppressed castes, their conversion and the problems such individuals face in society.

narratives have constructed dalit identities in various modalities . . . Everything holds a note of caste for the Keralite. An internal fear exists that if one is dark-skinned, even if a savarna, one may be mistaken for an SC (Scheduled Caste). Consumables identified with different castes and their tastes such as marar pickles, brahmin's wheat flour, marar *pappadam*, namboothiri tooth powder are widely marketed all over Kerala. The absence of such a market possibility for other communities is also a consequence of the savarna constructions of 'lower'-caste identities. There is also an invisible caste identity underlying the use of 'universal' categories such as servants, sweepers, agricultural slaves and folk singers.

Many proverbs have been built around savarna ideas of other castes. 'If the lowly acquire wealth, they will carry umbrellas even at midnight.'[7] 'Can the accoutrement of caste be simply peeled off?' 'You might catch a leech and put it on a mattress, but will it stay there?' 'Can a crow turn into a crane by taking a bath?' These are some instances of how the bodies and social status of avarna people are depicted in savarna discourse. Such figures are shaped by contempt as well as pity. While savarna bodies and lives are conceived of as respectable and national, the local or the indigenous takes form as leech, lowly idiot and crow.

This rejection of regional identities and the endorsement of pan-Indian savarna subjectivity also takes place in mainstream Malayalam literature. Most important is the treatment of savarna life transactions and symbols as *secular*. An analysis of M.T. Vasudevan Nair's (the most celebrated Malayalam writer after Thakazhi and Basheer) writing will provide us with a sense of the scope of this phenomenon.

In MT's novels we find the anger of those dismissed from the nair *tharavad*—the traditional matrilineal family home and property—but not the historical sensibility of those who leave the tharavad to its historical fate . . . Like MT, his literary predecessors, Uroob and Cherukad, also portrayed the decline/collapse of the

[7] Umbrellas are generally used in Kerala today to protect one from the sun. In former times the umbrella was also a symbol of high status.

tharavad. However, while Uroob tried to express mental conflicts by analysing society, in MT we see society being pushed to the rear, and the tharavad assuming primary importance. Further, it is after MT that relationships centred on the tharavad became the sacred form of human relations. It is as if Kerala society accepted that the most delicate of relationships necessarily speak the language of the tharavad. The linguistic modes of C.V. Raman Pillai or Chandu Menon were not received in this way. Models of Malayali life were shaped from the goodness of those helpless men in declining tharavads; and not from the great martial cultures of the north or the south. The language of nairs was accepted as secular. Consider the word *veedu* (home). Logan says that veedu or *bhavanam* is the place where nairs usually live. Within the nair caste, the powerful live in *idam*.[8] It was not *illam* or *mana* (namboothiri houses) or *pura* (thiya house) or *chala* or *madam* or *cheri* (dalit dwellings) that became the secular word in Kerala—it was the nair word 'veedu'.

In this way, the cultural transactions of the nair communities, including tharavad practices, the community's mode of inheritance and exchange—*dayakrama*—and terms referring to their dwellings, became the commonsense of Kerala culture. Kathakali became the art form bearing the cultural imprint of Kerala as a whole because it is an art form of the nair community.

The prose used in Malayalam novels and short stories should also be analysed in this way. To whatever extent tension may exist in the dialogue, the overarching narrative voice is always dominant-caste-identified. The result is that in the writing, the author's view assumes greater importance than the community being written about. Most important is the fact that the Valluvanadan dialect used by MT, as he depicted the transactions of the tharavad, attained dominance in all public and social transactions. This was part of a process that transformed the tharavad from being a system of inheritance to the cultural foundation of Kerala. This is why despite the decline of matriliny there still exist anxieties with

[8] Logan, William. *Malabar* (1887). Thiruvananthapuram: Charithram Publications, 1981.

regard to the tharavad. There is no great difference between MT's novel structure and the popular contemporary tharavad TV serials. Such frameworks rendered social movements irrelevant, and were introverted in nature. World and society in MT's novels are merely distances traversed by the individuals. . . . .

Also in this way, words, rituals and ideals related to tharavads became part of the standard and secular transactions of Kerala culture. The writings of MT rescued the tharavad—which Chandu Menon had made fun of—from its decline, and turned it into the imprint of Keralaness by developing it into a secular nostalgia for the common Keralite. It is because of this elitist sense of honour which the tharavad signifies, that the postmodern Keralite polishes and re-uses vintage objects ranging from kitchen tools and furniture to architectural traditions. This is why even novels which set out to depict regional life as distinct from the all-Indian savarna spiritual one, ended up being savarna narratives of regional life.

A sanskritized Kerala society didn't consider regional life and culture as worthy of intellectual attention. Discussion revolved around Upanishadic or Puranic notions . . . When this discourse descended to earth [and became secular], it remained with the lords of the earth—the brahmins and other savarnas. It began and ended with their interests. Modernism travelled the same path. Using European aesthetic/material awareness, the Kerala modernists could shrug off the fact that what they depicted as pure beauty was a savarna beauty. They did not have to wrestle with the material reality of Kerala in order to produce that conception. In O.V. Vijayan's—Kerala's prophet of modernism—novels, caste identities remain unmentioned. Vijayan himself tried to hide his ezhava identity and assumed a metropolitan air unknown to Kerala. All subsequent flag-bearers of Malayali modernism—Anand, M. Mukundan, Paul Zacharia—wrote as if they were writing Malayalam from Europe. They could invent Kerala men who could become any character—Aravindan of *Delhi*, Sunil or Joseph of *Alkoottam* (Crowd), Ravi of *Khasakkinte Ithihasam* (The Legends of Khasak)—that modernity envisaged. This was because they were 'larger' beings than those oppressed human beings who were shaped by a caste culture. They could walk rootless on earth, crossing the boundaries of caste. They enjoyed

a freedom which an ordinary man didn't have in his ordinary life. These novels romantically transcended the existing system. Like Koran of *Randidangazhi* who forsakes his oppressed caste identity and tries to escape by becoming an agricultural labourer, modernity implied fleeing from the real world. It had the alluring hollowness of casteless city aesthetics. Spokespersons of modernity like Anand, Mukundan and Vijayan lived outside Kerala. Kerala was merely a site of nostalgia for them. They were attacked by caste only from within and never from without.

Consequently, Kerala modernity was based on a totally individualist sensibility. It was about this supreme individual that Basham also commented. This modernity created an abstract individual who incorporated everything into an absolute and *ungrounded* idea of freedom. Unfortunately, that individual was a savarna Hindu or a savarna Christian. And it is that individual who asked in one of M. Mukundan's stories: '*Njanaranu Nanuare?*' (Who am I, Nanuar [nair]?) Nobody in a Kerala village can ask a question like this because everyone already knows his caste and religion long before he can ask such a question. Further, we should not forget that the question was asked to a nair. Kerala literature, from the sixties onwards, has been controlled by this sense of a modern individual, who romantically imagines himself as different from the society around him. For this group of writers, dalits were merely peons or servants. We meet such people occasionally in the works of C.V. Sreeraman or P. Vatsala or M. Sukumaran, writers who wandered through the outskirts of modernity. But their signature note, which takes the form of compassion and critique, is that of charity. The dalit figure attains only a peripheral form of mainstream citizenship.

What paved the way for the formation of new cultural equations in Kerala was the decline of communist movements, global ideological crises and cultural transactions after modernism. It is through these transactions that an oppressed community, which was depicted with benevolent compassion by the renaissance and discourses derived from that formation, could actually claim a right to authorship. Changing political equations in the north of India and the realities of caste and religion enabled them to accurately distinguish and identify the form of this authorship. Also, there was a section of dalits who,

despite having fulfilled Ayyankali's dream of becoming graduates, had remained hidden in communist or Naxalite movements and trade unions. This section now announced their identity and claimed the right to authorship as dalits. Such recognition of identity had existed earlier too in the form of community-based organizations (modelled on other similar organizations) that aimed at strengthening the awareness of one's caste, claiming benefits through it, and demanding a share of power. Both streams are joined in the new social order and this makes it possible for them to take their own stands in socio-cultural transactions.

The original form in literary history, of these oppressed communities coming into postmodern authorship transactions, may be located in Potheri Kunjambu's *Saraswativijayam*. In that novel, we find an appreciation of the community as a positive entity that we do not find in the other two 'dalit' novels, *Ghathakavadham* and *Parishkaravijayam*. Though extremely thin, a line of continuity runs from Kunjambu through the history of modern Kerala literature in K.P. Karuppan's poetry and T.K.C. Vaduthala's short stories, both of which have developed the experience of oppression into the basis of literary expression. Novels such as Paul Chirakkarodu's *Pulayathara* (Pulaya Hutment, 1962) and Kaviyoor Murali's *Ayyankalippada* (The Army of Ayyankali, 2001), written with the claim of being the first dalit novels, should also be regarded as historical efforts to assert this authorship. Though they end up as loud and indulgent because of several weaknesses, their historical importance should nevertheless be recognized.

It is, however, C. Ayyappan, who began writing during the period of modernism itself, who first problematized the fake human face of modernism. Through the short story collections, *Uchayurakkathile Swapnangal* (Dreams in Afternoon Sleep) and *Njandukal* (Crabs), he reveals the oppressive nature of Kerala modernity's literary formations. In his stories we find the effective use of magical realism in the Kerala context. Ayyappan's is the most creative and original dalit expression in Malayalam.

Kerala modernity's false sense of freedom and individualism is deconstructed by literary perspectives from the postmodern margins that recount the stories of small lives that were hidden under

the neon lamps of modernism. As in Marathi, the greatest stir has arisen in the domain of autobiography. The lives of ordinary people (as against universal citizens) now make autobiographies. Tales of communities and occupations have displaced those of the individual. Not only victory celebrations, but also torture and failure are marked in these new maps. The individual has disappeared and community history has appeared.

Another trend has also emerged in the autobiography. Those who are illiterate and ignorant of the techniques of literary writing have become literary authors through their oral narratives, which were recorded by those who could write. Autobiographies published in this mode include those of C.K. Janu, the adivasi leader, Nalini Jameela, a sex worker, and Mayilamma, the leader of the Plachimada struggle. These texts have challenged elite ideals of literature. They have pushed constructs such as the sacredness of the writer's self into a historical crisis. It is the very fragmentation of the authorial form of modernity that makes the literary texts of these new times so different.

The theme of these works is the complexity of social reality. They deal with specific and systemic issues and not with heroic crises faced by individuals. In the new literature, there are no great human beings and hence no heroes either. Society here does not simply comprise peons and servants who walk around with the hero's files. Reality itself, not the great characters that were created by realism, is the basis of art here. These ordinary figures are not designed for imitation. Their role is simply to represent. It is predominantly the subaltern groups that strengthen these new movements in Malayalam literature. That feminism itself is now addressing the populace of oppressed women is notable.

Only mainstream savarna literature, caught in its aesthetic theories, is perhaps still seeking universal truths.